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ABSTRACT

An interview on peace education with Tom Roderick (interviewer: Ate Bjerstedt) of Educators for Social Responsibility is presented in this document. Educators for Social Responsibility is a national teachers' organization in the United States that offers programs and curricula that are intended to help young people become engaged in the world. The interview discussed Tom Roderick's background, the activities of Educators for Social Responsibility, and his thoughts on a number of areas that concern peace education. (DB)

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STOP AND THINK!
DIALOGUE, CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND CREATIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN PEACE EDUCATION

Tom Roderick
and
The Project "Preparedness for Peace"

This miniprint presents an interview on peace education with Tom Roderick, Educators for Social Responsibility, New York. (Interviewer: Åke Bjerstedt.)

Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR) is a national teachers' organization in the United States offering programs and curricula that are intended to help young people become engaged in the world. ESR's publications show the emphasis of this organization on dialogue, critical thinking, multiple perspectives, non-violent conflict resolution, and social responsibility.

Among other things, Tom Roderick has cooperated with the New York City Board of Education (with Linda Lantieri and others) in producing a teaching guide on conflict resolution: "Resolving Conflict Creatively" (New York: Board of Education, 1988). Tom Roderick can be reached at this address: Educators for Social Responsibility Metro, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 450, New York, NY 10115, USA. – The interview is reprinted from "Peace, Environment and Education", 1990, *1*(1), 30-38.

PEACE EDUCATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM RODERICK, EDUCATORS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, NEW YORK

1.

ÅB: As an introduction, could you say a few words about yourself and your interest in the field of "peace education"?

TR: I got involved in education through the Civil Rights Movement in the early 60s. I saw education as a way to help bring about equality for African American people in this country, so my first job after graduating from college was to start volunteer tutoring programs; in particular there was one in Philadelphia for African American students there.

I had a Bachelor's degree in History, and then I came to New York and got my Master's from Bank Street College. I started teaching in schools in Harlem. I was educational director of an elementary school in East Harlem controlled by parents, the East Harlem Day School, which we built from a first and second grade school to a full eight-grade elementary school over a period of about eight years. I was associated with the East Harlem Day School from 1968 to 1980.

It was during the late 70s that I became aware of human survival as something that we couldn't just take for granted, but that we needed to secure by conscious choice and conscious action. My generation had grown up in the shadow of nuclear war and nuclear weapons, but the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam war movements had captured people's energy, and the nuclear threat was pretty much in the background from the early 60s until the late 70s. Then the nuclear issue came to the front of our consciousness as a problem that really needed to be addressed. I realized that the work I was doing trying to build communities for young people and parents in East Harlem was important, but could all go down the tubes, so to speak, if we couldn't deal with some of the human survival issues. The disarmament march in Central Park (in 1982) and my reading of Jonathan Shell's book *Fate of the Earth* pushed me over the edge.

I had thought about becoming director of an alternative school and doing political work on the side. But I realized that I didn't want to do the political work on the side; I wanted to work my way into the disarmament movement and spend all of my energy as directly as I could, working to ensure that we would never have a nuclear holocaust. Having made that decision, I gravitated toward Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR) because of my back-

ground in education. I felt that we needed to educate a generation of young people so that they could rise to the challenges of the nuclear age.

2.

ÅB: What do you think of first when you hear the words "peace education"?

TR: We called what we did in ESR in those early years "nuclear age education", not "peace education". People thought that the word peace was too much associated with communism, that the word had been in a sense corrupted and that we represented a new mind, and so we needed a new label, and that was the term "nuclear age education". Nuclear issues were the focus of ESR in the beginning. We knew that the whole issue of nuclear weapons was very controversial.

ESR developed an approach to teaching about controversial issues that was based on the idea of dialogue, of presenting students with multiple points of view on issues and teaching critical thinking skills and helping them make up their own minds. We certainly wanted young people to decide that there were alternatives to the arms race, but the leadership of ESR tried to be scrupulously fair in presenting opposing points of view to students and encouraging them to make up their own minds. As educators we felt it wasn't appropriate to use the schools to promote one particular solution to the arms race, or any kind of ideology. We wanted to put the issue of the nuclear arms race on the agenda of the schools, and on the agenda of the society, for people to talk about and think about and decide about in a democratic fashion. Our feeling was that it had been left up to the so-called experts, that the public had not been involved. Suddenly, in the 80s, we found ourselves in a situation where the end of the world literally was a possibility, where scientists could no longer assure us that if there was a nuclear war, human life would go on. So we were part of the movement saying: Stop, look what's happening. Many people were simply saying: Stop this madness! We were saying: Stop and think, and let's devote all of our energies to looking at this critically, examining various alternatives and choosing the best one.

I think this educational effort first became concrete and real for me when we started the program with the public schools in New York. What happened was that Linda Lantieri from the NYC Board of Education and I both gave workshops at a nuclear issues conference sponsored by the NYC Board of Education. A person who worked with Community School District 15 in New York City came to that conference. He attended our workshops, and he went away feeling that something had to be done about these issues in his District.

The superintendent in District 15 took an interest, and Linda Lantieri and I started working together. We presented the teachers with a variety of options about what peace education could mean in their District, and they chose to focus on creative conflict resolution.

For a couple of years, we called the program "The Model Peace Education Program", and then, as we expanded the program beyond that district into other districts, we found that the term peace education was getting in our way - it was raising questions in people that were distracting - and so we decided to change the name to "The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program", which we felt more accurately reflected what the program was about.

3.

ÅB: If you think back on your own school days, were there some aspects in your schooling that might be considered an attempt at "peace education"?

TR: There were very few aspects of my schooling that I would call peace education except for college. At Yale University in the 60s, there was a lot of support for students who were sympathetic to the civil rights movement and wanted to get involved. There were strong voices (such as the Reverend William Sloane Coffin) encouraging students to participate and get involved. Those things were important. However, I don't think there was anything in elementary or high school that I would call peace education.

4.

ÅB: Do you believe that schools in your country, as you know them today, contribute to a "peace education"?

TR: It's difficult to generalize. ESR is doing what it can to promote education for citizenship, participation, nuclear-age education, education for empowerment, peace education - whatever you want to call it. We've had a tremendous response in New York to our ideas, but I don't think it has been as easy for people in other parts of the country. The response in New York City has something to do with Linda Lantieri's being strongly devoted to the cause, and at the same time being someone very much trusted as an insider in the public schools. We started in District 15 in Brooklyn with 20 teachers. During the 1989-90 school year, 1000 teachers from 13 NYC Community School Districts have participated.

ÅB: What has been the age range of students involved?

TR: It has been mainly elementary students (kindergarten to grade six). But we work in some junior high schools. And we are now working with a small

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district of alternative high schools in New York. We are working with five alternative high schools, and are completing a high-school curriculum on conflict resolution.

5.

ÅB: Do you think it is at all possible for schools to contribute to a "peace education"? If so, what are some of the steps and measures to be taken that you think of first?

TR: I think it's quite possible. That's what we're doing in New York City. We are introducing the skills of conflict resolution and inter-group relations into a large, challenging urban school system, and we're having some success with that. An evalution study indicates that changes are happening in individual students, in the climate of classrooms and sometimes even the climate of a school.

But our work would be a lot more effective if schools themselves were restructured in fundamental ways. I think that schools need to be a lot smaller than they are, and that more control needs to be in the hands of the people who are actually in the school - the principal, the teachers, the parents and the children. Right now you have big schools, especially on the high-school level; but even some elementary schools are more like factories than anything else. In fact, they look like minimum-security prisons sometimes. So that's one problem.

ÅB: What would be some of the steps that the individual teachers should take when starting this kind of work in the classroom?

TR: Our approach is to give the teachers a good amount of training (20-24 hours of introductory training in conflict resolution and in teaching conflict resolution to children). We give them a curriculum guide that they can use as a resource-book for planning lessons for their classes.

Then we have consultants who visit classrooms to help the teachers put the curriculum into effect. Even if you give people a good amount of training and a curriculum, there are many pressures that teachers are under, and fears they have about teaching in a different kind of way. They appreciate someone who comes in and holds their hand, demonstrates a few lessons, co-plans lessons with them, and generally provides support. We're talking about a support-person, not a supervisor. There's a role for the supervisor, but this role is to be completely supportive, helping the teachers without evaluating or criticizing.

6.

ÅB: What would be some of the possible differences in peace education approaches among younger and older students in schools?

TR: The main difference is the extent to which you connect the inter-personal skills they are learning to what's going on in society and the world. The older students are more aware of the rest of the world and are more able to make generalizations and deal with abstract concepts. Our main emphasis with the elementary students has been inter-personal conflict resolution. Certainly there are places where you can make connections to societal and global conflicts with elementary school children; but we get a lot more opportunity to do that with high-school students. Also, with high-school students there are different kinds of conflicts and more intensity, related to the changes that go on in adolescence.

ÅB: So in this particular program you have had a special focus on creative conflict resolution. Would you also take up what was the early focus of ESR - the nuclear issues?

TR: We would if they come up, and there are places in the curriculum where nuclear issues could possibly be brought in. But these days it doesn't seem to be something that's on our students' minds. Students in New York seem to be more concerned about getting mugged on the way home, or about being shot by a drug-dealer or having a fight with their parents. ESR has a very good curriculum on U.S.-Soviet relations, so the organization are still addressing issues of relationships between the superpowers. But that has not been our emphasis during the past few years in New York.

7.

ÅB: If you were an upper-secondary school teacher in a subject with which you are particularly familiar, how would you like to make the students more conscious of and more prepared for problems of peace, within that subject?

TR: I think that what we're trying to do is help students become active participants in a process of change and in a process of conserving the world that we live in. A basic concept is that everything is connected to everything else: environmental issues, world hunger, nuclear war, and economics. A concept that has become more and more popular in the peace movement - the concept of common security - is relevant here. We are all linked, we are all interdependent: every country is vulnerable to environmental destruction, economic catastrophes in other countries, a possible nuclear war, and hunger and disease in other countries. Since we are all interdependent, we all have to

work together to solve these problems, and all of the disciplines are involved. Economics, physics, biology - you can make these connections in all of those disciplines. So I would think that what you would need to do if you were teaching any subject is to think: What are the implications of global interdependence for this particular area?

Our approach is to ask the teachers to set aside 45 minutes a week for a specific workshop on the themes of our curriculum. In addition to cooperation, communication and conflict resolution, there are units on preventing prejudice and promoting equality in which we deal with such topics as racism and sexism. There's also a unit on peace-makers. We ask the teachers to set aside 45 minutes for a specific lesson that they put together from our curriculum. But then we ask them also to infuse these concepts into everything they do the rest of the day. For example, when the class is reading a story that involves a conflict, you can use that to further develop the concept of conflict. In social studies you can study about conflicts in various parts of the world.

8.

ÅB: In international debates, the terms "disarmament education" and "peace education" have been used, in addition to some other related terms ("global education", "education for international understanding" etc.). Do you have any comments and preferences as to this terminology?

TR: I wish we could find better terms, because I don't think any of those terms are good, but I haven't been able to think of a better term myself.

ÅB: Is it correct that you are still avoiding the term "peace education" within ESR?

TR: Yes, we usually don't talk about peace education. I have problems with it. It isn't just for political reasons that people have attacked it. I don't think anybody wants war, so for us to say that we're doing peace education as distinct from what someone else is doing seems to me a little bit pretentious. I can see why the term bothers people.

9.

ÅB: In many countries, questions related to disarmament and peace are highly controversial. Would you anticipate any difficulties, for example with parents or other members of the community, when introducing peace education in schools? If so, what kind of difficulties? Do you see any way out of such problems?

TR: I do see difficulties. I think that if it's done in certain ways it's going to

alienate people. For instance, if you start introducing nuclear issues in a way that terrifies kids - that's going to upset people. If you put forth certain solutions without looking at them from various points of view, you run into problems. Sometimes, when a city is mainly populated by military personnel, nearby a military base for example, even to start raising the questions causes problems. But for the most part, I think it's the way that's it's done rather than the content.

Our idea of conflict resolution is that you can deal with conflict in a way that respects people. That approach can apply to controversial issues. You need to introduce such issues in a very careful and sensitive way, and to begin where your constituency is. In New York, we asked the teachers what area they wanted to work with. They were concerned about inter-personal conflict in their classrooms primarily, so that's where we started, but then we can build on that and proceed to other areas.

I think it's very important when you introduce these issues that you avoid pushing any one solution or any narrow political agenda. It has to be a real solid educational process with a long-range perspective. There's that slogan: If you can change my mind completely to go to your point of view today, then someone else can come along tomorrow, and I'll go off in the other direction. What we want to develop is first: people who care about what's going on in the world, and second: people who are able to think about it in a constructive and thorough way, so that they make up their own minds. I think that if that's what you're really doing - then, in most places you won't run into too much trouble; and if you do, then at least you're having an honest fight: you aren't vulnerable in a moral or educational sense.

10.

ÅB: What needs to be done in teacher training in order to prepare future teachers more adequately for the area of "peace education?"

TR: Our program is based on staff development. We feel that this is absolutely essential. If you just hand a peace curriculum to teachers, it will probably have no effect at all. Teaching about controversial issues in a sensitive way is a different way of teaching. When teaching conflict resolution, we find that we need to begin by helping people find ways of dealing better with conflict in their own lives, including the way they view conflict and the way they handle their anger. - We're dealing with very basic things here.

ÅB: I understand that you are doing workshops with teachers that are

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in-service. Have you also been involved in any initial teacher training?
TR: We do some workshops in colleges of education, but that has not been done to any great extent. It would be wonderful if colleges of education could move more in this direction. These topics should be part of training for new teachers. They should be dealt with in methods courses and in philosophy of education courses. People should be thinking right from the beginning that one of the purposes of education is to foster the development of an active citizenry: people who are going to be responsible for the future of the world, where the future cannot be taken for granted.

11.
ÅB: In many schools, the students represent a variety of nationalities and cultural backgrounds. To what extent would it be possible to use this fact as an aid in education for peace? Would you expect some difficulties in doing so?
TR: It's certainly possible and important. Here in New York, you don't have much choice. If you try to open things up and talk about conflicts, it's impossible to avoid multi-cultural issues. At the same time, it's difficult to do so, because people are scared of opening these kind of things up. We have developed some strategies that help teachers do it in a way that feels comfortable for them. It's an area where we need to work more, but I think we have a good start: it's part of the curriculum, it's part of our training for teachers.

12.
ÅB: Sometimes the term "global survival" is used to refer to an area dealing both with the risks of nuclear war and with the risks of far-reaching environmental damage through pollution and overuse of resources. How do you look upon dealing with these two categories of risks together in school? Do you have any suggestions as to how the teacher could approach the problem area of environmental damage?
TR: So far, we haven't done much in this area. Environmental issues are of growing concern to people, and I think it would be a good area for us to address with students. Conflict resolution is based on respect for other people, on listening and trying to come up with solutions that meet both parties' needs, on putting yourself in other people's shoes. This is similar to what we need to do with the environment. We need to "listen to" the environment, we need to respect the environment.

Nobody wants to wreck the environment, but different people have

different opinions about how to save the environment and about how serious the problem is. In ESR we would want to go about this in the same way we did with nuclear issues: we would present opposing points of view. What we would be trying to do is put the issue on the agenda of the schools, get people talking, increase awareness and help people research and think about the problems.

ÅB: Has ESR published anything on this particular issue?

TR: We published a curriculum on toxic waste a few years ago, and we recently published a resource guide for teachers entitled *Caring about the Environment.*

13.

ÅB: Is there anything else that you would like to add about the school and peace education?

TR: Conflict resolution is a very exciting, growing field. We don't have all of the answers, but we feel we have some tools that work, approaches which - if they are widely known and put into effect - would make a great difference. We are trying to spread the word about these approaches. At the same time, we are trying to develop the field further. That's why it's so exciting: there's so much more to learn!

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